

Pop's Chill Thrills Aren't So Cheap

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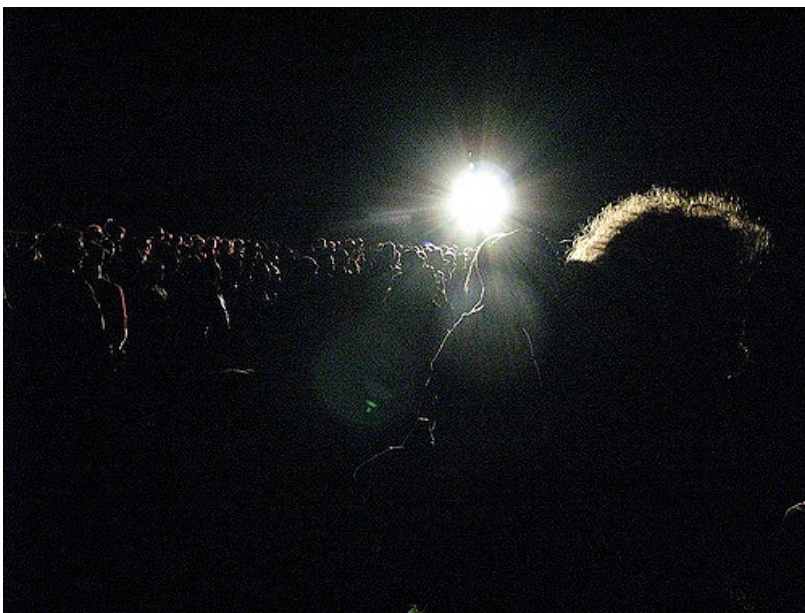
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Abstract

Just a year ago, Soundcloud and YouTube were teeming with maximalist EDM remixes of Top 40 pop songs, like R3HAB's early summer 2015 mix of Rihanna's "BBHMM". The remix is packed full of amped-up musical gestures.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, EDM, Hip Hop, Music



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Just a year ago, Soundcloud and YouTube were teeming with maximalist EDM remixes of Top 40 pop songs, like [R3HAB's early summer 2015 mix of Rihanna's "BBHMM"](#). The remix is packed full of amped-up musical gestures. It drops 30 seconds in, has a huge 15 second soar from 2:30-2:45 and some loud distorted treble synth, and the up-pitched vocals underscore just how much R3HAB sped up the tempo. Fast forward a year to May and June 2016, where maximalist banger remixes are hard to find. Outside of EDM Trap, which continues to focus on the turn up (e.g., this R3HAB & Henry Fong remix of Calvin Harris & Rihanna's "[This Is What You Came For](#)") nobody's really pushing songs to be more intense by amping up their tension-release structures. Instead, the remixes are simmering down; even R3HAB chills out a bit with his 2016 remix of Rihanna's "[Work](#)," which holds off its first drop for more than a minute, and when it does it only soars for five seconds. R3HAB isn't the only one on the charts bringing it down a couple notches; the lyrics and the breezily tropical music in Seeb's remix of Mike Posner's "[I Took A Pill In Ibiza](#)" is a Dear John letter with brostep-fueled EDM, and it was huge in spring 2016. It topped the UK Singles chart, the Billboard Hot 100, and the Billboard Mainstream Top 40 chart—so it's safe to assume it's tracking a common and popular aesthetic.



<https://youtu.be/foE1mO2yM04>

Why have producers toned down the tension-release? There are definitely aesthetic reasons: pop presents new styles as it evolves. But there's also an underlying political reason. In neoliberalism, our political economy (with its structure of subjectivity) requires people to take on a lot of risk. That's what entrepreneurs do: they make a bet, and the riskier the bet, the bigger the potential reward. For example, as formerly public services get privatized, individuals assume risk that social welfare programs once insured against: college students take on tons of debt in the hope of finding a decent job, defined-benefit pensions disappear in favor of stock-market based retirement plans, and so on.

While YOLO-style maximalism celebrated that risk-taking, people just want a fucking break already. In other words, the general public [has the feeling we've been cheated](#) by neoliberal reforms and their promises to pay us back for what we've risked. We're risk-weary. Sometimes that weariness manifests as irritability—think of the (often race-based) anger motivating supporters of Trump, Sanders, and Brexit. But sometimes that weariness just manifests as a preference for soft, gentle ease. In mid-2010s vernacular, that preference is called “chill.” [As Alana Massey defines it](#), “chill” is the state of “being too far removed from anything that looks like intensity.” [Some argue](#) that chill is the decade's dominant affect.



“Chill” by Flickr user Picklefish, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

We can hear chill's dominance in the Top 40. Soars and drops are tension-release structures closely associated with EDM. They have been integrated into the musical vocabulary of non-EDM pop styles, most prominently by songwriter Max Martin (see: Taylor Swift's "[Shake It Off](#)," Katy Perry's "[Dark Horse](#)"). Even as dubstep falls out of fashion, soars and drops are still all over the Top 40 and EDM remixes of pop songs. However, in mid-2016 soars and drops are much less intense and climactic than they were in 2012. Often, instead of intensifying damage to build tension and release it climactically, soars mark the beginning and end of song sections, like the transition from verse to chorus. With the tension-release flattened out, soars function more to organize the song grammatically than to express a meaning or feeling...because committing to and expressing an idea or an emotion is deeply un-chill.



<https://youtu.be/jFOVXYXXoA>

Take, for example, some of the more popular remixes of Drake's "One Dance," which recently [broke the UK record](#) (since they started counting downloads) of 12 weeks at the top of the chart and has had a couple of weeks [on top of the Billboard Hot 100](#). Though several of the songs on [Billboard's remix round-up for "One Dance"](#) feature soars and drops, none of the songs are particularly maximalist, nor are the soars hugely climactic. The Koni feat. Casey Malone remix above uses tiny soar-hints to signal the end of one song section and the beginning of another; for example, around 48 seconds a tiny little soar marks the transition from verse to chorus. The main soar behaves more conventionally, but it's super chill and doesn't turn much of anything up. It begins around 2:20, swooshing up for five seconds only to ever-so-gently drop us for another five seconds. This drop combines the more traditional dubstep drop, which is marked by a bass, and the Max-Martin-style pop drop, which is usually marked by a vocal flourish (e.g., "Bad Blood," "Shake It Off"). Here the combination works to soften each individual element: a decidedly buttery and un-wobbly bass is hidden under Malone's decidedly restrained "lose con-trol" vocal. This soar has lost its sonic edge, and it affects the way we hear the drop's lyrical content: losing control isn't about transgression, but laid-back indifference...you know, chill. Soars and the idea of losing control usually represent risk, but in this remix they do just the opposite.



<https://youtu.be/nYh-n7EOtMA>

With Sean Paul singing “free up yourself get outta control” as the main soar’s drop (3:00 in the video, 2:30 in the song), Sia’s latest hit, “[Cheap Thrills](#)” also takes the edge off traditional representations of risk. Firstly, the song is about rejecting economic risk as a source of pleasure and fulfillment, the kind of risk that Katy Perry sung about in 2013 when she gave a “[shout out to all you kids buying bottle service with your rent money](#)” right before the soar in “[This Is How We Do](#).” There, the soar represents the rush those kids get from their risky behavior. That sort of thing isn’t thrilling anymore. Instead, thrills, like “feel[ing] the beat” and “dancing” come cheaply, with less economic risk—you don’t have to worry about hustling to get your rent money.

“Cheap Thrills” also avoids sonic representations of that risk: it uses vocal drops to transition between verses and choruses, but these drops aren’t preceded by the percussive cascade (at around 2:17) that constitutes the soar in “This Is How We Do” and, more importantly, Justin Bieber’s “Sorry,” which shares “Cheap Thrill’s” tresillo hook. In “Sorry,” the soars are two measures long: a treble synth rises in pitch as the percussion moves from six beats of sixteenth-note snares, to a beat and a half of pause, and then to a percussive cascade on the last half beat serves as the drop.

“Cheap Thrills” doesn’t soar at all. Or rather, it hides a very tiny soar in the vocals. At the end of the first pre-chorus, Sia shortens her phrase length and repeats two fragments where normally a full line would go: “I ain’t got cash, I ain’t got cash” leads us up to the drop, which is her vocal “I got you bay-be.” But that’s not the only way the song hides the soar in the vocals. That percussive riff that we hear at the end of “Sorry”’s soar is hidden in Sean Paul’s “bidi-bang-bang-bangs.” Those syllabifications of drum riffs mark the end of his introductory rap, and punctuate the line where Sia repeats “hit the dance floor, hit the dance floor.” That line sits at the beginning of the pre-chorus, the antecedent phrase to the soar’s consequent phrase. This part of the soar isn’t just moved to a different voice, it’s relocated to where it doesn’t normally belong. Putting the quick percussive riff at the beginning rather than at the end of the soar further deflates it. Like shifting it to the vocals from the instrumentals, the time-shift puts the soar where we aren’t listening for it so it can sneak by without raising the affective temperature.

Just like it hides its soars, “Cheap Thrills” hides its conceptual or ideological reliance on the economically rational risk that soars represent in sound. [Like a MasterCard commercial](#), the lyrics laud the pricelessness of intangible things like interpersonal relationships and aesthetic experiences: “I ain’t got cash but I got you bay-bee,” “I don’t need no money, as long as I can feel the beat.” Sia’s narrator praises unquantifiable, non-monetizeable things: “cheap” thrills are the best kind because they’re more valuable than anything money can buy (because they’re scarce and not available to everyone). This praise substitutes one measure of economic rationality for another, soft human capital—[what philosopher Shannon Winnubst calls “cool”](#)—for hard cash, and in so doing hides the economic risk the same way the song hides its soars. The risk Sia’s narrator makes isn’t directly financial: she’s not partying with her rent money. Rather, this claim to transcend entrepreneurial risk-taking is a bet on abnormal behavior. It’s risky, in a kind of meta-risky way, to refuse to take on the kinds of risk economic and social structures compel everyone to assume. After all, you could appear lazy or unproductive, a drain on the rest of us. But you could also appear progressive, forward-thinking, and discerning—in other words, chill.



"Bet" by Flickr user Lionel Roubeyrie, CC BY-SA 2.0

What determines the outcome of Sia's narrator's wager? With this bet, as with all bets, the house always wins. As I've written about before, unrisky, safe, 'normcore' behavior is at bottom a wager on whiteness. Whiteness separates good (acceptable) from bad abnormality, transcendence from pathology. "Cheap Thrills" buries sonic/affective and ideological risk so that it can *appear to* transcend the imperative to hustle all the time. However, as Kemi Adeyemi wrote in SO!'s "Sound and Affect" series, lean—both the drug and the aesthetic—also sonically de-escalates the "I got six jobs I don't get tired" hustle in a way that puts black people at further physical and economic risk:

Rappers like A\$AP Rocky, Schoolboy Q, Future and others create musical odes to and demonstrations of the slowed pace of lean as it provides them a break from norms of physical and affective comportment...Lean radically grounds them, in other words, in an alternative body-space-time continuum that converses with the demands the neoliberal state places on the black body.

Lean aesthetics help black artists and audiences cope with the demands Adeyemi mentions, like [working six jobs and not getting tired](#) or the endless cycle of the "work hard, play hard" grind. Even though lean's affect is chill and woozy, it doesn't fully eliminate risk. As Adeyemi shows, lean's alternative "physical and affective comportment" intensifies black bodies vulnerability to physical injury (seizures) and state violence.

If chilled-out soars are pop's compliment to hip hop's lean aesthetic, it's fair to say that we're all over neoliberalism's imperative to hustle and assume risk. But not all of us can actually escape that risk without consequence: chill isn't a universally cheap thrill. As Sia's song demonstrates, such cheap thrills leverage whiteness as collateral to mitigate risk. Pop's chilled-out approach to tension-release structures like soars and drops illustrates contemporary forms of whiteness and white privilege, namely, the privilege of appearing to avoid economic rationality and risk.

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Robin James is Associate Professor of Philosophy at UNC Charlotte. She is author of two books: *Resilience & Melancholy: pop music, feminism, and neoliberalism*, published by Zero books last year, and *The Conjectural Body: gender, race and the philosophy of music* was published by Lexington Books in 2010. Her work on feminism, race, contemporary continental philosophy, pop music, and sound studies has appeared in *The New Inquiry*, *Hypatia*, *differences*, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, and the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. She is also a digital sound artist and musician. She blogs at its-her-factory.com and is a regular contributor to *Cyborgology*.

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